Decolonizing Gender Dynamics: Reclaiming Lawino's Voice in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*

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ABSTRACT

Using Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonization theory, this article argues that Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* reclaims African cultural voice and identity. Even though it is available in English, *Song of Lawino* is a kind of narrative poetry borrowed from the traditional Acholi song. This study uses contextual and stylistic analysis to show how p'Bitek's poetry acts as a force for decolonization, advocates for cultural preservation, and addresses collective issues. Findings show that by satirizing African middle-class elites who adhere to Western values, the two chapters from *Song of Lawino* studied "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" and "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish" highlight the clash between European and African cultures. In these poems, Lawino challenges gender dynamics and defends traditional practices, as well as criticizes the shallowness of Westernized lifestyles adopted by her husband Ocol. Through this strong-willed woman's criticism, Okot p'Bitek's poetry reveals the negative impacts of credulous cultural assimilation and underlines the importance of maintaining traditional traditions for the well-being and identity of the community.

Keywords: African identity, decolonization, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek

INTRODUCTION

Okot p'Bitek was a well-known poet, anthropologist, and social critic from Uganda who was active in East African poetry during the 20th century. His works, particularly his satirical monologues, addressed the conflict between European and African cultures. His breakthrough work, *Song of Lawino*, satirized Africa's middle-class elites who embraced Western bourgeois values. *Song of Lawino* contains 13 poems about a resolute woman from the Acholi tribe in Africa who challenges patriarchal norms and stands up for her culture. The poem mourns her husband Ocol's loss of cultural identity as he adopts Western customs and takes a second wife. Lawino attacks the superficiality of modern lifestyles while defending the value of traditional African ways of life for their community's well-being and identity. Poets like Okot p'Bitek can act as "mouthpieces" for marginalized groups, touching readers' emotions and making them think critically. He was deeply interested in Acholi culture, influenced by his mother's singing and composition (Ayodo, 2012). Activism through art can pose risks, such as threats, violence, or silencing as witnessed by this Gulu-born artist. Okot p'Bitek returned from exile and taught at Makerere University. He founded the Annual Festival of African Arts and was director of the National Theatre and Cultural Centre in Uganda. He died in 1982 due to a liver infection.

Translated into Indonesian by prominent author Sapardi Joko Damono titled *Afrika Yang Resah: Nyanyian Lawino Dan Nyanyian Ocol* (P'Bitek, 2011), *Song of Lawino* has been extensively studied, with postcolonial theory being predominantly used to explore the

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multifaceted experiences of African women (Gabriel, 2018; Gikandi, 2021; Kahyana, 2021; Kazmi & Ishaq Khan, 2022; Mukundi, 2021; Ntangaare, 2021). Using the postcolonial perspective proposed by Franz Fanon, Aime Caesar, and Homi K. Bhabha, Iskarna's article explores the postcolonial complexity of an African woman represented by Lawino to reveal the challenges of decolonization due to cultural clashes between local African and Western cultures, which can lead to self-hatred racism, political group disputes, woman oppression, and mimicry (2011). Different feminist interpretations of the work abound (e.g., Echendu & Ogunyemi, 2014; Jagire, 2013; Mbogo, 2021; Neigh, 2011). The 'femafricanist' perspectives, for example, reveal oppression and violations of women's rights due to modernity, temptation, and postcolonial complexity (Echendu & Ogunyemi, 2014).

The current article aims to explore the transformative potential of Okot p'Bitek's two selected chapter poems from *Song of Lawino*, "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" and "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish" in addressing common challenges like poverty, particularly poverty of the mind. This article will examine *Song of Lawino*'s use of language to explore complicated gender and societal relationships in postcolonial times using Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonization theory, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer and theorist, posits that language is intertwined with power and cultural identity. His decolonization theory was a significant contribution to postcolonial philosophy. He supports restoring indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultures suppressed during colonial authority. It happened that the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek shared Thiong'o's vision of decolonization, focusing on cultural and linguistic reclamation. It is interesting to mention in passing that decolonizing the ambiguous nature of African management can also be accomplished by critically examining Okot p'Bitek's works (Van Rinsum & Boessenkool, 2013). In light of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theory, this article will argue that Okot p'Bitek's works reclaim African voices and cultural identity through a silenced yet steadfast woman named Lawino.

METHOD

This study iss a documentary interpretative analysis to examine decolonization themes in Okot p'Bitek's selected chapters of *Song of Lawino*. It used a stylistic analysis that was contextualized by the postcolonial condition in Africa in light of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theory of decolonization. Data used in this study were taken from two chapters, i.e., "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" (#2) and "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish" (#13) found in *Song of Lawino*. Both chapters were chosen for their representation of cultural and linguistic richness to provide a comprehensive understanding of the clash between indigenous African traditions and Western modernity.

The book *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* used in this research is one of Poets of Africa Series published first by East African Educational Publisher in 1972. The edition used here was the 2008 edition. The introduction of the book by G.A. Heron was useful and cited in this study. The analysis began with the use of language in both poems. Contextualization was made by referring to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonization theory on the power dynamics of language in a colonial context. Thiong'o's 1986 book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, emphasized the use of indigenous languages by African writers to reclaim their cultural identity and resist colonial oppression. Thiong'o encouraged African writers to appreciate indigenous cultural expressions and traditions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonization theory was therefore applied to analyze p'Bitek's work, providing insights into cultural and linguistic dynamics that help restore cultural integrity and self-determination in postcolonial societies. Finally, the results of the analysis were presented as conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will look at the poet's profound critiques of colonialism which manifest themselves in two ways: *first*, through the use of language to restore traditional African culture, and *second*, through resistance to Eurocentrism. Two verses from *Song of Lawino* are discussed

here: Chapter 2 "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" and Chapter 13 "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish". To give a glimpse of the story, Lawino's marriage to the educated and Westernized husband, Ocol, is in trouble for two reasons: first, Ocol's scorn for Lawino's lack of education; and second, his betrayal by falling in love with Clementine. Ocol loves Clementine because she, too, has lost her identity and behaves like a White woman.

Reclamation of Acholi culture through language

Rejecting imperialist ideology and regaining their pre-colonial pasts are difficult tasks for decolonized states. Postcolonial critics draw attention to the many problems that these duties entail. To embrace their pre-colonial cultures, some local writers, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, write in their original tongues. The publishing industry, however, demands English. African writers must write in their native tongues, translate their writing into English, or hire someone. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o discusses language as a powerful tool for colonial powers and a counter-weapon for colonized nations, emphasizing its dual role as a communication medium.

That language has the power to oppress and liberate applies to how Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* came to readers today. Originally written in the Acholi language, *Song of Lawino* was self-translated into English in 1966. It was later translated into French by Frank and Henriette Gauduchon and published in 1983 under the title *La Chanson de Lawino*. In 2001, Sudanese writer Taban lo Liyong, a colleague and friend of Okot p'Bitek, translated the text, arguing that the author only loosely wrote an English version to satisfy an English-speaking audience and give prominence to parts most easily rendered into English. Admitting the difficulty, Liyong attempted to correctly reproduce the original text while conveying its complexities and nuances in a rhythmic English appropriate to the original discourse (1993). Indeed, the translation of this work into different languages poses its challenges as proven by Kiyimba (2021) and Okere & Chai (2018), to mention but two. The following discussion is based on p'Bitek's self-translation of *Song of Lawino*. It investigates the style used in the two chapters discussed to reinforce Acholi's identities.

P'Bitek aims to enhance the poems' sense of Africanness and freshness by utilizing literary devices, and straightforward, easily comprehensible language that are translated from the native Acholi language. The first rebellion in terms of language is the writing style. In the "Introduction" to *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, G. A. Heron (2008) explains that Okot p'Biteks did not write songs per se, his long poem was modelled on Acholi traditional song. Neither is this style common in such Western literature as narrative poems. The 'song' consists of 13 chapters. When writing *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek collaborated with various groups of performing artists to present the work at the Gulu Festival (Heron, 2008, p. 5). According to Gray (1999), *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* have an affinity for experiential poetry, which begins with song and moves on to drama to articulate and refer back to it for meaning. It is therefore not Western-influenced and the work belongs to the oral tradition, which is more like a musical score than print.

Like any traditional song, p'Bitek employed a 'chorus' as seen by repetition in his lines. As an example, here is Lawino's assertion about what the ideal wife is like in Chapter 2 "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband":

> You win him with a hot bath
> And sour porridge.
> The wife who brings her meal first
> Whose food is good to eat,
> Whose dish is hot
> Whose face is bright
> And whose heart is clean
> And whose eyes are dark
> Like the shadows: (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 41)

Giving a set of criteria for a good wife, Lawino emphasizes the significance of a woman's ability to provide for her husband's needs. The repetition of words like "hot" suggests sensuality, energy, and virtue. She juxtaposes traditional Acholi values and Western civilization, affirming that a good wife is more than merely physical attractiveness.

Another obvious repeated part is seen in Chapter 13 "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish", which is accompanied by symbolism. Lawino laments about her husband's loss of identity and masculinity as a traditional Acholi man and calls for reconciliation with his ancestors.

> Beg forgiveness from them
> And ask them to give you
> A new spear
> A new spear with a sharp and hard point.
> A spear that will crack the rock.
> Ask for a spear that you will trust
> One that does not bend easily
> Like the earth-worm.
> Ask them to restore your manhood!
> For I am sick
> Of sharing a bed with a woman! (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 119)

The word "spear" is repeated four times to stress that being a learned, Westernized man, Ocol should not have abandoned his local customs for a foreign lifestyle. Lawino compares a spear to an earthworm, reminding Ocol to reclaim the weapon inside his own culture, "with a sharp and hard point...that will crack the rock." Ocol's current state is compared to a weak earthworm, reflecting his perceived loss of power and agency, as he is associated with the earth rather than aggressive, African masculinity. Indeed, the spear is rarely used as a symbol of masculinity in current Western culture. The poet's usage of this term is thus seen as resistance.

Another linguistic and cultural resistance is the inclusion of local vegetation, animals, names, places, etc. including Acholi vocabulary seen most obviously in "Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish" or the last part of *Song of Lawino*. For example, there are at least 10 words left untranslated: *labikka*, *lapena*, *lukut*, *lurono*, *malakwang*, *ojuu*, *olam*, *olim*, *omwombye*, *simsim*. Malakwang the title chapter is a unique Ugandan stew consisting of sweet potatoes, millet bread, groundnut paste, and various spices. Originating from Northern Uganda, this delicacy characterized by tangy and sour notes is a testament to the region's culinary heritage. While Malakwang is often eaten with friends and family, it is also said to help with milk let-down during breastfeeding (Acire, et al., 2023). Lawino mentions different types of roots such as *omwombye* to clear her husband's throat and *lurono* to lose his tongue, followed by such varied shoots as *lapena* and *olim* to cure his swollen throat (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 118). It appears here that p'Bitek employs contextual inference rather than word-for-word translation. When there is no direct counterpart or literal translation for an unfamiliar word in the source language, this method leverages the surrounding words, sentence structure, and situation to deduce its meaning. The poet's foreignizing translation (Venuti, 2017), which retains the 'alien' Acholi words in the English version of the poem, is a postcolonial gesture. The use of words with no gloss like simsim oil to refer to sesame butter further highlights resistance to the colonial language and culture more effectively.

> Let them drop simsim oil
> Into the holes of your ear,
> Let them scoop out the gum
> That has filled your ears for so

long,
The thick dust you collected
From the altar
And the chaff
From the books
And the useless things
From the magazines and
newspapers,
And the radio and television! (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 118)

The colonizers used their languages as tools of power, asserting control, facilitating administration, and fostering cultural dominance over native populations by way of books, magazines, newspapers, radio, and television – all "useless things" detested by Lawino. British schools in countries like Kenya and Uganda often imposed Eurocentric colonialist ideology on indigenous peoples, leading to their subjection and subsequent imitation of their colonists' dialect, mannerisms, attire, and way of life. Lawino, on the contrary, proposes that Ocol use traditional medicine to treat his problems, which include a blocked throat, blocked ears, blind eyes, and a dirty tongue. Physical treatments, such as traditional foods and herbs may help Ocol heal his 'Westernized' throat, ears, eyes, and tongue. Mwita (2019) argues that Ocol is a mentally colonized man, who has a slave mentality, valuing Western culture and despising African culture. Ocol's education is seen as alienation and subordination, failing to transform him into a civilized man. He needs to return to his cultural roots.

To conclude, the *Song of Lawino* can be interpreted as a testament to the Acholi culture's reclamation through the mouth of Lawino. Gender dynamics is proven here by Okot p'Bitek's use of Lawino, an illiterate woman, to vocalize the importance of preserving tradition through her 'song' to resist Westernization. Lawino represents a woman who manages the conflicts that arise from Westernization and traditional gender norms. She upholds the Acholi culture and its customs, stressing the value of honoring her ancestors' customs, language, and ways of life. Lawino is against Westernization because she sees it as a threat to the community's well-being and a betrayal of African cultural heritage. She opposes gender stereotypes that are still prevalent in (Western) education, calls for women to have agency and respect, and criticizes patriarchal practices that restrict women's opportunities and maintain gender inequity. As such, Lawino's persona combines feminism and traditional beliefs. It is difficult to characterize her as either conventional or feminist, hence the dynamics. Lawino also exemplifies the conflict between adaptation and resistance by opposing Westernization but admitting that advancement and change are necessary. In doing so, language is used in the poem to express resistance whilst reclaiming the Acholi culture.

Resisting Eurocentrism

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes two conflicting African powers during his time. The first is an imperialist tradition represented by the native ruling class, which receives economic and political backing from the international bourgeoisie. The second force is the peasantry and proletariat, who are supported by patriotic soldiers, intellectuals, and progressive anti-imperialist segments of society in their fight for African national culture and heritage. As such, he calls for resisting imperialist culture. "Imperialism is total," says the Kenyan writer, "it has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world today. It could even lead to a holocaust." (Thiong'o, 2005, p. 2). In other words, Thiong'o opposes Eurocentrism, the belief that European or Europe is the center and most important.

Thiong'o's novel published in 1965, *The River Between*, explores the link between Christianity and colonialism. Using a postcolonial lens, Iskarna (2018) reveals how Christianity is employed as an ideological instrument to construct a colonial myth and

perspective. Christian missionaries received support from European colonizers, while newly converted natives re-read the Bible to resist colonial bonds. The novel provides a counter-discourse to colonial hegemony, yet certain portions still fall into it. Christianity and its education play an important part in making the colonized Kikuyu aware of their difficulties, implying that colonial control is not completely rejected.

Learning from Thiong'o's 1965 novel, it can be said that the colonial subject is split between the cultures of the indigenous population and the colonizer, resulting in a double consciousness. Similarly, two opposing forces are evident in the two chapters of *Song of Lawino* discussed. The imperialist tradition is represented by Ocol and his mistress Clementine, while Lawino is the anti-imperialist defender. Her resistance to Western culture extends to the disapproval of the European standard of beauty. In "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" Lawino dislikes Clementine's aspiration of becoming like a White woman and her wearing too much make-up, saying

> Her lips are red hot
> Like glowing charcoal,
> She resembles the wild cat
> That has dipped its mouth in
> Blood,
> Her mouth is like raw yaws
> It looks like an open ulcer,
> Like the mouth of a field!
> Tina dusts powder on her face
> And it looks so pale;
> She resembles the wizard
> Getting ready for the midnight
> Dance. (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 37)

Here, Lawino considers European beauty standards strange and even unpleasant. The wearing of powder by Ocol's mistress is deemed unnatural in Lawino's eyes. Powder is necessary for individuals who have done evil, but not for those who do not have such antecedents that can separate them from society (Kazmi & Ishaq Khan, 2022). The lines above show that whiteness is unhealthy – "like raw yaws", "like an open ulcer", "pale", etc. Lawino desires a more natural appearance that represents her ethnic heritage. She resists imperialism's cultural and psychological impacts on colonized people, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlighted.

To resist imperialist culture further, Lawino continues to show her disapproval of Ocol's conversion to Christianity. Like the hero in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel mentioned above, Ocol is alienated from the Acholi culture. She convinces Ocol about the goodness of Acholi traditions:

> Listen Ocol, my old friend,
> The ways of your ancestors
> Are good,
> Their customs are solid
> And not hollow
> They are not thin, not easily breakable
> They cannot be blown away
> By the winds
> Because their roots reach deep into the soil. (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 37)

Ocol does not share Lawino's rejection of European culture, especially religion, because he has no pride in his own local culture, causing Lawino's displeasure. She continues:

I do not understand
The ways of foreigners
But I do not despise their customs,
Why should you despise yours? (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 41)

For Lawino, the White people's customs are suitable for the White people. It is therefore foolish for the non-White people to follow the White people's ways. Okot p'Bitek himself hardly believes that "the two ways of life are equally valid for Africans" (Heron, 1989, p. 18). Mukundi (2021, p. 15) argues that in today's globalized society, Lawino's overvaluation of precolonial beauty definitions disregards societal changes. What African people need now is cultural adaptation without being "brainwashed", despite the preservation of core pre-colonial elements as suggested by Lawino.

As a final point, "The Woman with Whom I Share My Husband" concludes with Lawino's persistent call for returning to Acholi customs:

Listen, my husband,
You are the son of a Chief.
The pumpkin in the old homestead
Must not be uprooted! (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 41)

The loyal bearer of Acholi culture and wife of the newly Westernized husband makes the same request that becomes the final line of *Song of Lawino*: "Let no one uproot the Pumpkin." (P'Bitek, 1989, p. 120). The act of uprooting pumpkin represents the disruption of traditional ways of life brought by colonialism, which often downplays the value of indigenous cultures. Lawino's focus on their ancestral land and traditions demonstrates the continual fight against cultural erasure caused by Eurocentrism.

CONCLUSION

The reclamation of native culture through language is a complex and challenging task for decolonized states. Building on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonization approach of using native tongues to express their pre-colonial pasts and resist imperialist ideology, this article has shown that *Song of Lawino* by Ocol p'Bitek is evidence of decolonization complexities and limitations thereof. By using straightforward, easily comprehensible language translated from the native Acholi, p'Bitek reinforces the work's sense of Africanness through Lawino the title character. The two chapters studied feature a repeated phrase that emphasizes the loss of identity and masculinity of Ocol, Lawino's Westernized husband. Such an unfavorable portrayal of the man as being a non-traditional Acholi man is a resistance to European culture. The inclusion of local vegetation, animals, places, and Acholi vocabulary, such as the Malakwang dish, is another linguistic and cultural resistance.

Following Thiong'o, this article has also shown two conflicting African powers represented by Lawino, the anti-imperialist defender, and Ocol the anti-thesis. Lawino proposes that Ocol use traditional methods to cure his problems, such as a blocked throat, blocked ears, blind eyes, and a dirty tongue – all caused by Western teachings. Okot p'Bitek uses the traditional, uneducated woman, not the intellectual man, to emphasize the importance of safeguarding Acholi culture from the threat of Westernization. This study has therefore shown how important gender dynamics are. Despite Lawino's illiteracy, she is unafraid to criticize Ocol's fixation on Western education, implying that his schooling has made him conceited and estranged from their cultural origins. Lawino desires autonomy and respect for herself. She argues for her right to voice her ideas and make decisions, challenging the idea that women are solely men's property. Lawino opposes patriarchal norms that restrict women's

chances and uphold gender inequality. She challenges the discriminatory practices that often disadvantage women.

Nevertheless, informed by Thiong'o's decolonizing theory, Lawino's staunched resistance to Western culture provides no room for possible positive cultural exchanges, which post-colonial society must inevitably encounter. Changes are inevitable, and adopting aspects of another culture may not necessarily require brainwashing. As a final remark, to stay relevant, future studies should examine *Song of Lawino* within the wider, global cultural contexts.

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